

June 3, 2002

River District Board Moves on Drought Remedies

Glenwood Springs, CO - The Colorado River Water Conservation District Board of Directors gave unanimous support to measures that will reduce water demand on the West Slope and allow for storage of the saved water in reservoirs for later use. Faced with the prospect of West Slope reservoirs being unable to supply demands by mid to late summer, the River District is moving forward with two plans to decrease demands on stored water and to provide for an opportunity to store additional water before the scant remaining snow pack disappears.

To accomplish this, the River District board approved two separate incentive measures to reduce the water requirements of senior water users on the Gunnison River and the mainstem of the Colorado River. By reducing the demands of senior water rights on rivers and streams, additional water can be stored by a variety of West Slope reservoirs for later release and the burden placed on stored water supplies throughout the summer can be reduced.

The board approved an agreement with Redlands Water and Power to cut back on the amount of water used by Redland's hydroelectric plant. The River District will repay Redlands for the lost revenue that would have been generated by normal operations of the power plant. In a drought year such as this, water is more valuable than electricity. The agreement calls for power generation to be cut back from July through October reducing the Redlands' senior water demand from 750 to 600 cubic feet per second from the Gunnison River. The cost of this arrangement may reach \$85,000.

The reduced water demand on the Gunnison River will help keep the "call" off the river, meaning that fewer upstream water users with water rights junior to the power plant would otherwise be cut-off to keep up with the plant's water needs. Endangered fish species in critical habitat on the Gunnison River will also benefit from increased water available in storage in the later summer months, due to this water savings.

Among the benefits achieved from reducing the water demand at this power plant will also be decreasing the amount of water removed from Blue Mesa Reservoir. Blue Mesa, the largest reservoir in Colorado, has the potential to be depleted drastically this summer. "I can't remember the last time anyone has seen the reservoir that low," noted River District Manager Eric Kuhn.

This innovative solution to the present dry conditions was achieved through the flexibility and cooperation of the Redlands Power and Water Company and Excel Energy. "Everyone is working together to share the shortages," said Redlands Power and Water General Manager, Gregg Strong.

Additionally, negotiations are underway on a second plan to preserve water stored in Green Mountain Reservoir. The River District is working with the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation and water users in the Grand Valley to stretch mainstem Colorado River resources by decreasing the total amount of water required in the Grand Valley. Additionally, the River District is exploring an expanded use of Ruedi Reservoir to meet a portion of the Grand Valley's water demands, thereby further reducing demands on Green Mountain Reservoir.

To accomplish this goal, the River District proposes that the Orchard Mesa Irrigation District redirect its water return flows to a point upstream on the Colorado River where the Grand Valley

Irrigation Company can use the return flow to satisfy its water rights. However, this arrangement significantly reduces the efficiency of the Orchard Mesa District's water delivery system. Accordingly, the River District is exploring compensation to Orchard Mesa for its increased costs.

The water saved by reducing the water demand would be banked in Green Mountain Reservoir. The reduced water demand on Green Mountain would, in turn, prolong the use of its stored water resources, which are rapidly diminishing and could run out by mid-August. Built to compensate the West Slope for water transmountain diverted at the headwaters of the Colorado River, Green Mountain Reservoir is the workhorse water storage facility for Western Colorado, but has not received sufficient inflows of water this year to fulfill its water contracts.

The River District is also working with the Bureau of Reclamation to conserve water in Green Mountain Reservoir by making additional releases from Ruedi Reservoir. The River District proposes using Ruedi water that has already been contracted for, but will not be used this year, to meet a portion of the demands placed on Green Mountain Reservoir by downstream water users.

The combined effect of these actions will be to extend the irrigation season for West Slope farmers and ranchers struggling with the drought, to allow for a small addition to stored water supplies and to keep more water in rivers and streams later into the year.

True relief for the current drought conditions won't arrive until the state receives considerable rainfall this summer and a better than average snowpack this winter, something Colorado hasn't had for the last three winters. Flexibility and wise management, as demonstrated by the River District, will help to manage this state's scarce water resources through these dry times.